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Near East and South Asia Review

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7 November 1986

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25X1

Near East and
South Asia Review

[Redacted]

25X1

Supplement

7 November 1986

Page

Article			
	Iraq: The Kurds Strike Kirkuk	[Redacted]	1
	[Redacted]		

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An attack by Kurdish guerrillas with Iranian support against Iraq's Kirkuk oil facility last month appears to have caused only slight damage, but the implications of the raid could be significant. The Turks fear the Iraqi Kurdish revolt will spill over into their own Kurdish areas, and they thus oppose Kurdish-Iranian cooperation.

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Some articles are preliminary views of a subject or speculative, but the contents normally will be coordinated as appropriate with other offices within CIA. Occasionally an article will represent the views of a single analyst; these items will be designated as noncoordinated views.

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Article

Iraq: The Kurds
Strike Kirkuk

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An attack by Kurdish guerrillas against Iraq's Kirkuk oil facility last month appears to have caused only slight damage, but the implications of the raid could be significant. The operation, in which Iranian commandos participated, angered the Turks, who immediately protested to Tehran. The Turks fear that the Iraqi Kurdish revolt will spill over into their own Kurdish areas, and they thus oppose cooperation between the guerrillas and neighboring Iran. Nonetheless, we believe that Tehran will continue to conduct joint sabotage attacks with the Kurds, even at the risk of further antagonizing the Turks.

Kurdish Problem for Iran and Turkey

Iran has long been active on the fringes of the Iraqi Kurdish revolt against Baghdad. The Kurds are seeking to wrest the northern provinces of Iraq from Baghdad's control, and this fits into Iran's war strategy because it diverts Iraqi troops from other areas. To encourage the Kurds, Iran has given them limited financial and material aid, but it has been restrained from doing more by the Turks.

Turkey, with a large and potentially rebellious Kurdish population of its own, fears the impact of a successful Kurdish revolt in neighboring Iraq.¹ It has therefore cooperated with the Iraqi authorities to disrupt the Kurdish guerrillas' activities. The Turks have mounted intensive patrols along their border with Iraq to prevent the guerrillas from resupplying via Turkey.

Iran, on the other hand, has allowed the Kurds to move supplies across its border to the guerrillas. At the behest of Ankara, however, Tehran generally

¹ Turkey's Kurdish population may number as high as 10 million and is concentrated in the southeastern provinces adjacent to Iraq. Iraq's Kurdish population is about 2.5 million.

permits only the passage of small arms to the guerrillas. Turks have made clear that sophisticated weapons—particularly shoulder-fired missiles—must be kept out of the rebels' hands because such weapons could dangerously escalate the fighting.

The Kurds and the Iranians Team Up

Until recently, the second-largest Iraqi Kurdish rebel group, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), had indifferent relations with Iran. Led by veteran guerrilla chief Jalal Talabani, the PUK is the most independent of the Iraqi opposition forces. Depending mainly on its own resources, the PUK has gained control of a strategic area abutting the Kirkuk oil facility. Tehran made overtures to Talabani in the past, but the guerrilla commander backed away from formal cooperation, regarding Iran's offers of aid as inadequate.

Last month, however, Talabani's guerrillas teamed up with Iranian commandos to sabotage Iraq's oil facility at Kirkuk. The raid was in response to Iraq's devastating air attacks on Khark Island and other facilities, and Tehran publicized the operation widely, claiming that Iraq's major oil installation was completely destroyed.

According to the US Embassy in Baghdad, Tehran's claims of success were overblown—the damage to the field was slight. The Iraqis flew diplomats and Western journalists to the site of the raid to discredit the Iranian boasts.

Turkey's Reaction to the Kirkuk Raid

Turkey's reaction to the Kirkuk raid was immediate and unambiguous. According to Turkish press reports, Turkey's Foreign Minister conveyed a verbal

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7 November 1986

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message to Iran, warning that the attack caused Turkey "some anxiety." Kirkuk is vitally important to Ankara, the Minister declared, and Iran must refrain from attacking it. [redacted]

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Turkey receives one-third of its oil from Iraq and has a strong economic interest in seeing that production at the Kirkuk facilities is not cut off. Moreover, the Iraqi-Turkish oil pipeline receives substantial fees from oil transported through the line to the Mediterranean. [redacted]

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Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister Sheikh ol-Eslam visited Ankara after the Kirkuk raid, principally to calm the Turks' anger over the operation. [redacted]

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Outlook

Tehran, by cooperating in a military operation with the PUK guerrillas, has considerably enhanced the organization's prestige. Moreover, the extensive publicity given the raid by the Western media has boosted the status of the Kurdish movement worldwide. Neither of these developments pleases the Turks. [redacted]

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We believe that Tehran will undertake more joint sabotage attacks with the Kurds, even at the risk of antagonizing the Turks. If these attacks jeopardize Turkey's internal security or vital interests, we believe the Turks will respond militarily, probably with cross-border raids on the Kurds' guerrilla bases. [redacted]

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